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ABSTRACT

The role of English in the Soviet Union is discussed, with attention directed to: the characteristics and training of English teachers, the type and availability of instructional and related materials, educational administration in relation to English teaching, the development and planning of English instruction, English outside the educational system, British and American support for the teaching of English, current research in English linguistics, and sources of further information. It is noted that English is the most important foreign language in the country, but because of limited teaching time and inadequate materials and methods, the average student has very poor knowledge of it. University students have better instruction, and some specialists graduate with excellent command of English, although lack of contact with native speakers and conservative literature produces formal speech. While the study of literature is circumscribed by ideological considerations, great interest in contemporary works exists. Few native speakers of English are teachers in the Soviet Union; they are therefore a limited influence. (MSE)

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ENGLISH TEACHING PROFILE

Country: Soviet Union

Date: January 1986

1. ROLE AND STATUS OF ENGLISH

English is by far the most widely spoken and studied foreign language in the Soviet Union, and there seems to be no threat to its dominance. Its status as the world's principal international language is fully recognized, and many of the intelligentsia take the trouble to acquire a considerably greater command of it than is strictly necessary for their work or studies. Amongst younger people, the status of contemporary Western youth culture, in particular, encourages the study of the language.

It is a medium of instruction only in the English departments of institutes of higher education, its use for this purpose having been discontinued in the special English-language schools (see Section 2 below) because of the lack of staff qualified to teach other subjects through the medium of English. It is nonetheless widely used throughout higher education, partly because students may be expected to consult English works in the original (largely in scientific and technical fields) and partly in acknowledgement of its importance as an international language.

English is not used as a means of communication within the Soviet Union, but English books, particularly contemporary novels when available, are keenly read, both in the original and in translation, by the intelligentsia generally. The English-language weekly Moscow News carries serializations of English novels, and English books are extensively reviewed in the monthly Inostrannaya Literatura (Foreign Literature). The only British newspaper or periodical available to Soviet people is the Morning Star, which is much cheaper in the Soviet Union than in Britain. 12,000 copies of each issue are distributed in the Soviet Union and are obtainable from news-stands in central Moscow and other major cities.

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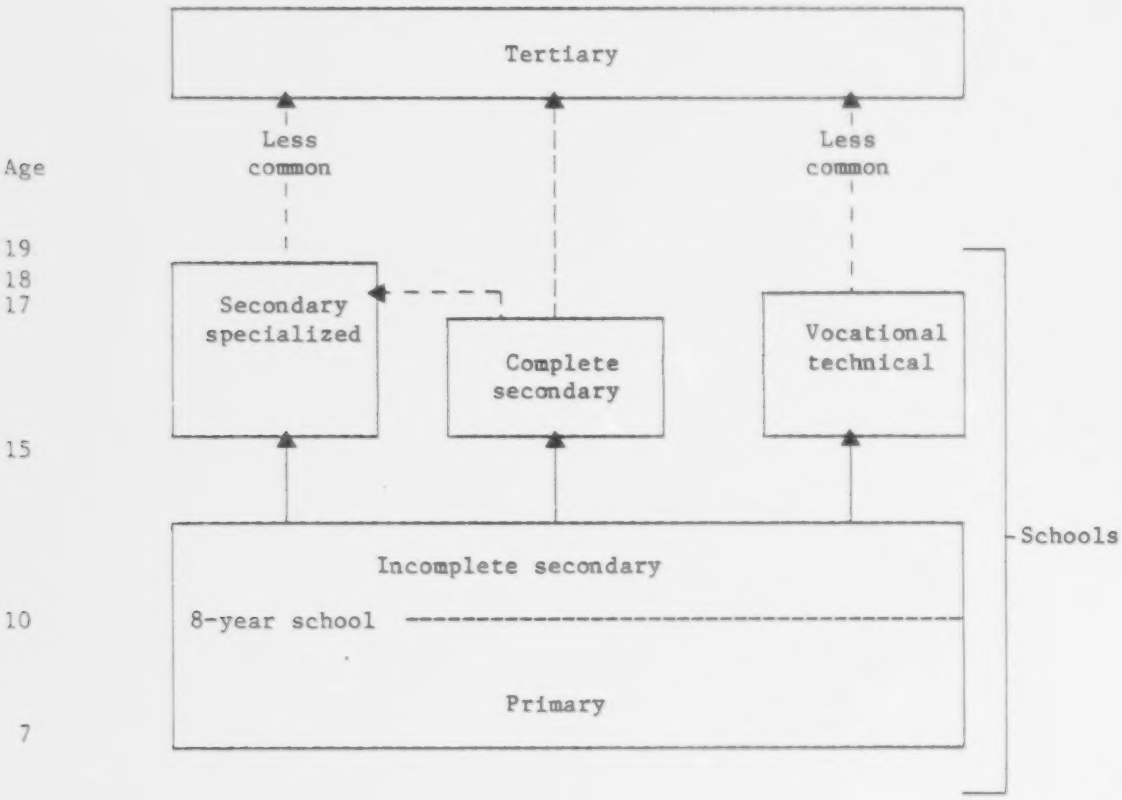
2. ENGLISH WITHIN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Despite the plethora of languages spoken in the Soviet Union, where Russian is the mother-tongue of less than half the population, the school curriculum is virtually the same throughout the country. In non-Russian areas however, Russian is not normally the medium of instruction, and pupils in many parts of the country spend a year longer in school than native speakers of Russian to master the language. Otherwise, the following description of English teaching in the Soviet Union, which is based on Russian-language areas, holds good for the whole country.



Below tertiary level the system is compulsory, but pupils have a choice between three different types of education when they finish the incomplete secondary stage.

Pre-primary and primary

Although it is rare for children to start learning English before they begin school, a few in the cities do, either at a kindergarten or as members of privately-arranged groups taught by qualified teachers outside their normal working hours. Primary school, which comprises the first three years of the eight-year school, does not normally include English, except in a few special English-language schools (see below).

Secondary

Incomplete

A foreign language is a compulsory part of the curriculum from the fourth form and more than 70% of pupils now study English, the remainder being divided

almost entirely between German, French and Spanish. The timetable includes three hours of the foreign language per week in the fourth, fifth and sixth forms, and two in the seventh and eighth, out of a weekly total of thirty hours.

Complete

After the eighth form, the more academic pupils generally go on for another two years of full-time formal academic education. These final two years are often simply the ninth and tenth forms of the eight-year school but many schools, especially in rural areas, stop at the eighth form, so that their pupils must go on to another school if they wish to have a complete secondary education. The technical and scientific bias of the Soviet school system becomes more pronounced at this stage, and above the eighth form only one hour per week is devoted to the foreign language.

Special English-language schools

Included within the ten-year school system, and only in major cities, are a few special English-language schools. In these English is taught for six or seven hours per week, beginning in the second form. Despite the abandonment due to lack of properly qualified staff of the aim of teaching all subjects in English, they remain very popular, since many of their pupils go on to higher education. There are also special schools for German, French and Spanish and even some other languages. Of the 111 special language schools in Moscow, 53 specialize in English.

Public examinations

At the end of the tenth form, pupils can take the certificate of secondary education, which entitles them to apply to an institute of higher education. It includes an oral examination in the pupil's foreign language, in which the pupil is presented with a list of questions, given a short time to prepare answers, and then invited to speak. The pupil may then be more closely questioned by the examiners, who are simply teachers from the school. Marks are awarded on a four-point scale, only the lowest grade being regarded as a fail.

Secondary specialized schools

These institutions give a combination of general and vocational training, and are not exactly schools in the English sense of the word. They are normally called tekhnikums, and offer courses in semi-professional occupations such as draughtsmanship and clerical work, but their academic training includes the study of a foreign language. Students can obtain both a professional qualification and a certificate of secondary education, and are thus eligible to apply to an institute of higher education if they wish. The full course lasts four years, but a growing number of students enter them for a two-year course on finishing the tenth form of a complete secondary school.

Vocational technical schools

Here again the term 'school' is rather misleading, the emphasis being strongly on learning a particular trade. The course, which normally lasts three years, culminates in a trade diploma but a foreign language is in the curriculum and the graduates of these institutions are also entitled to apply for higher education.

Part-time and correspondence schools

Complete secondary and secondary specialized courses are also offered on a part-time basis as evening and shift schools, and are intended for those who cannot or do not wish to continue with full-time education after the age of fifteen. For those in the more remote areas, there is the option of continuing their formal education after the age of fifteen through correspondence schools. Both types of school offer the same curriculum as their full-time counterparts.

Syllabus and textbooks

Individual schools have no discretion in syllabus or choice of textbooks, the theory being that all pupils learn exactly the same thing at exactly the same pace throughout their years in school.

Inspection

Inspection in Soviet schools is carried out by highly qualified and experienced teachers known as metodisty. These staff may become full-time inspectors, or may divide their time between teaching and inspection. The open lesson is one at which other teachers - sometimes even teachers from other schools - are present. A teacher may be expected to give several open lessons each year, and as it is the more experienced teachers who do so most frequently, it seems that they are often regarded as demonstration lessons.

Results

It is widely acknowledged that the results of English teaching in Soviet schools are not inspiring - only to be expected in view of the limited time devoted to what is, for Russian speakers a much more difficult language than say, French, German or Spanish are for English speakers - and the average school leaver is unable to make much practical use of the language.

Tertiary

Entry

The Soviet Union has 67 universities, 202 pedagogical institutes and 65 polytechnics, and hundreds of technical institutes of various kinds. School leavers who wish to go on to higher education apply directly to only one institute, and are given an entrance examination. For those wishing to specialize in what would be known in Britain as an arts or social science subject, this includes a test of ability in their foreign language.

Universities

The sixty-seven Soviet universities all offer English as a main subject, students always combining it with another language, usually German, French or Spanish. The course lasts five years, by the end of which time the student has normally read ten English novels in the original. The English author most widely read by Soviet students is John Galsworthy, but J B Priestley, A J Cronin and Somerset Maugham are also frequently found in university syllabuses. Otherwise, the main source of authentic English material in the universities is the Morning Star.

Syllabus and textbooks

Institutes of higher education have a much freer hand in syllabus and choice of textbooks than have the schools, and often use works written by their own teachers. Even so, these must first be approved centrally.

Non-formal and adult education

In the cities, many adults study English at evening classes, which usually take place in schools, institutes of higher education, or palaces of culture. Courses last up to four years, with a minimum of four hours instruction per week. The most prestigious are the state courses, which use university textbooks, and culminate in a diploma at university level.

Correspondence courses

A few institutes of higher education run correspondence courses in English. The students' fees entitle them to textbooks and records, and regular work assignments must be completed and sent to the institute. The courses last three years, and a final examination for a diploma is taken at the centre.

Radio and television

Radio is not used for English teaching in the Soviet Union, but there are television programmes for schools on both national and local networks. (The BBC programme Follow Me is used.) National television also broadcasts an English programme for children outside school time, and one for adults.

Teacher training

Pre-service

English teachers are trained either at universities or at pedagogical institutes, which also offer a five-year course combining English with another language. Students of these institutes spend half of each of their final two years on teaching practice in schools, and although university students do considerably less, their degree also qualifies them to teach.

In-service

In theory, all schoolteachers attend a course at an Institute for the Improvement of Qualifications once every five years, but the practice is rather less rigid. Courses are generally organized on a one-day-per-week basis, teachers being released from their schools to attend. Metodisty (see above) may order teachers to take refresher courses if they consider it necessary.

Tertiary education

Teachers in tertiary education are supposed to attend an FPK (Faculty for the Improvement of Qualifications) course once every five years, though this again is not always strictly enforced. The courses require full-time attendance at an institute of higher education for a complete term.

English for specific purposes

ESP is widely taught in the Soviet Union, since foreign languages are often compulsory in higher education, even for students of technical and scientific subjects. As yet, however, teachers receive no formal training in ESP but must work things out as they go along.

Professional associations and organizations

There are no organizations specifically for English teachers but virtually all teachers in the country are members of the USSR Trade Union of Workers in Education, Higher Schools and Research Establishments. This is not a

bargaining body like Western trade unions, but one of its functions is to publish the thrice-weekly Uchitelskaya Gazeta (Teachers' Newspaper) which provides a forum for complaints and discussions of matters of controversy.

3. TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

The formal statement of demand is the Anglo-Soviet Cultural Agreement which provides for an exchange of up to twenty-six teachers on a reciprocal basis. This does not however reflect real demand. There is an enormous demand for native-speaker teachers but this is stifled by official distrust of foreigners. Occasional indicators do appear. The cautious requests from Moscow State University for more teachers and the evident delight shown by institutes which finally find that the system has provided them with a teacher are examples. The apparent ease with which the French place over seventy teachers is another.

The Cultural Agreement provides for up to twenty lectors in universities. In practice, Soviet insistence on reciprocity and the British side's difficulties over placing Soviet lectors in Britain means that there are only fourteen lectors in the Soviet Union at present. The Agreement also allows for three teachers in schools for three months.

In a different political climate there would undoubtedly be room for increased British activity in English Language Teaching. In practice, the provisions of the Cultural Agreement dictate what can be done. Very conservative approaches to language teaching limit the contribution that teachers can make and they often find their work frustrating and lacking in professional challenge. They are not treated as part of the system, their services being called for as and when required.

About fifty Soviet teachers of English visit Britain every year for summer schools. There is no scope for direct teaching of English since all education in the Soviet Union is strictly state controlled and no private enterprise is permitted. The political climate would have to improve before there could be any possibility of Council organized in-country courses.

4. MATERIALS SUPPORT

The supply of textbooks to schools and other institutions is not a problem with regard to quantity, but quality is not high. All schools are obliged to use the Uchebnik Angliskovo Yazyka (Textbook of the English Language), but institutes of higher education have a freer choice, and frequently use works prepared by their own members of staff.

Textbooks apart, books in English are not widely available. To take only one example, in the Soviet Union's third largest city, Kiev (population about two million), there is one small shop selling books imported from the West at inflated prices. Some English books are printed in English by Soviet publishers, but the quantity is very small and there is a strong emphasis on what might be termed middle-brow classics of an acceptable political complexion, such as the works of Galsworthy and Maugham.

The same is true of English literature found in translation in the Soviet Union.

Television is used in English teaching in Soviet schools (see Section 2 above), but although film projectors, record-players and open-reel tape-recorders are said to be found in all schools, there is a dearth of good material for them. Language laboratories are the exception rather than the rule even in city schools, and those found in institutes of higher education are often antiquated and unreliable.

Lacking above all in the English-teaching materials found in the Soviet Union are examples of contemporary colloquial English.

5. EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION IN RELATION TO ENGLISH TEACHING

There are two ministries involved in English teaching. The Ministry of General Education administers school education (pedagogical institutes and polytechnics) while the Ministry of Higher and Specialized Education deals with universities and other higher education institutions. There is a foreign relations department in each Ministry which deals with the implementation of relevant parts of the Cultural Agreement. Key appointments are the staff of the foreign relations departments through which all activities must be channelled. School textbooks are written by committees of experts and seldom change. They are the same throughout the Soviet Union. Textbooks in higher education institutes may be written by the staff of the institute.

6. DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING OF THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

In outlining to the Supreme Soviet in April 1984 proposed reforms in the school system, Politburo member Geidar Aliyev made two statements which epitomize the Soviet ideal in education: 'The development of a scientific Marxist-Leninist world outlook in young men and women must be the top priority in all this work', and 'The reform we are now discussing further develops ... Lenin's principle of the Soviet school system, that of combining schooling with useful work'. These two maxims, which together form the antithesis of the liberal concept of education, have underlain the Soviet education system throughout its existence, with the exception of the Stalinist era, during most of which the second of them was achieved.

When the communists came to power in 1917, they inherited an illiteracy rate of about 80% and a country exhausted by war. Considering this and the vast upheavals which gave the country almost no respite for the next thirty years, it was a notable achievement to have eradicated illiteracy in half a century, and one which would not have been possible without the very high degree of centralization which has always characterized the Soviet education system.

Such was the disruption caused by the revolution and the consequent civil war and foreign intervention that it was not until the 1920s that the Soviet authorities were able seriously to come to grips with the vast educational task before them. And they did not make an auspicious start: the uncritical application of 'progressive' techniques together with the premature attempt to create a polytechnical education system in which children would be given theoretical knowledge and practical experience of the basic processes of production as well as the normal academic training, ended in failure.

The result was that in the 1930s, Stalin reversed the process completely and instituted a highly academic and formal system which remained unaltered until

his death in 1953. Beginning in the fourth form, which was then the final year of primary education, every child had to pass an examination to earn the right to further schooling. The few who survived beyond the seventh form to enter the final three years of complete secondary school were regarded as university material, but many of those would fail to gain admission to an institute of higher education.

This highly authoritarian and elitist system began to crumble on Stalin's death in 1953, and the reforms of 1958 set up the system which has survived until today. A strong emphasis on polytechnical education was one of the central points of these reforms, but after Krushchev was ousted in 1964, the attempt to force all pupils into some form of vocational training was dropped. In 1970, by which time the number of places in secondary schools had increased by a factor of seven since Stalin's death, a new curriculum placing the emphasis on thinking rather than rote-learning, was introduced for all subjects except languages.

The Soviet school system is now about to be overhauled once more, the most dramatic change being that children will begin school at the age of six rather than seven, thus expanding primary education by one year. The options before a pupil after the ninth form will be substantially the same as those at the end of the eighth today, but with a much greater emphasis on vocational training, which all pupils will be required to undergo, regardless of the type of school they attend. Better textbooks, curricula and syllabuses are also to be introduced, and the whole new system is scheduled to be fully operational by 1995. The principal aim of the reform is to raise the level of professional, particularly technical skills, since it was felt that the education system was not producing the skilled personnel necessary to meet the objectives of the plan. There was a tendency, associated with a major movement of people to the towns, for school leavers to want white collar jobs and for many to aim for higher education.

Higher education has grown enormously since the revolution, the eight universities of 1917 having grown to sixty-seven today. There are in addition many hundreds of other establishments of higher education, including polytechnics, pedagogical institutes, and technical and scientific institutes of many kinds. Even so, the number of places available in higher education is still far from sufficient to satisfy the demand from school leavers.

With the emphasis which the Soviet authorities have always placed on technical and scientific subjects, foreign language teaching has not been prominent in this great expansion, but the way in which English has pushed other languages into the shadows is striking: twenty years ago, English and German had approximately the same number of students, with French and Spanish lagging behind, but today more than 70% of school pupils study English. The proposed school reforms mentioned above will include new English textbooks and a revised syllabus, but details of these are not yet available.

7. ENGLISH OUTSIDE THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Soviet Union does not permit the establishment of private commercial educational institutions, and a combination of strict ideology and lack of hard currency make it virtually certain that it never will.

The only form of English teaching which takes place outside the state system is the private lessons which many teachers give to supplement their incomes.

8. BRITISH SUPPORT FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

This is provided by the Anglo-Soviet Cultural Agreement. For more details see Section 3.

9. AMERICAN SUPPORT FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

At the Geneva Summit in November 1985 the USA and the USSR signed a general exchanges agreement which included provision for English language teaching. The agreement covered expansion of academic and educational exchanges such as fifteen Fulbright teaching professors, forty long-term International Research and Exchange Board (IREX) researchers, exchange between archives and joint seminars, language teacher training programmes and language teacher exchange.

10. OTHER AGENCY SUPPORT

None.

11. COMMERCIAL OPPORTUNITIES

None.

12. CREATIVE WRITING

None.

13. CURRENT RESEARCH

The research done in the English departments of Soviet universities shows a very strong bias in favour of language as opposed to literature.

Although all students are required to prepare and defend a dissertation in their final year of undergraduate work, these papers do not demand substantial original research, and are not published.

At postgraduate level, two degrees can be taken - Candidate of Sciences and Doctor of Sciences - both of which require the defence of a thesis based on original research. The Candidate's degree might be compared to the standard of the British Ph.D but the doctoral degree is considerably higher, and may be undertaken only by students who already hold the Candidate's degree, have done several years active work in the subject field and conducted and published major independent research. The Doctor of Science is rarely awarded and is regarded in the USSR as an extremely high academic distinction.

Research in teaching methods is carried out by postgraduate students in the pedagogical institutes, and leads to the degree of Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences.

At a still higher level, the Academy of Pedagogic Sciences of the Russian Federation conducts research into educational problems in many different fields. The Academy, which has about a hundred members, also publishes journals, textbooks and other educational works.

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15. GENERAL STATEMENT

More than 70% of Soviet pupils now study English, making it by far the most important foreign language in the country, but a combination of limited teaching time and inadequacy of materials and methods mean that the average school leaver has only a very poor knowledge of the language.

In higher education the situation is markedly better, and English specialists often have an impressive command of the language by the time they graduate. The lack of contact with native speakers however, and a concentration on rather conservative literature, tend to produce students who speak noticeably formal English.

The study of literature is tightly circumscribed by ideological considerations, but students and others show a great keenness to get hold of the sort of contemporary works which would never be found in a university syllabus.

The very small number of native English speakers teaching in a land as vast as the Soviet Union cannot hope to exercise any very profound influence over the

teaching of English in the country as a whole, but their very presence is of some significance in a country which continues to impose strict limits on all contacts with the West.